

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom is alarmed by the coordinated bomb attacks against churches and monasteries in Iraq last week. At least six people were reportedly wounded in seven separate attacks in Baghdad and Mosul as Christians were celebrating Christmas and the Epiphany on Jan. 6; three days later, bombs targeted three churches in Kirkuk. The attacks were the latest to target Iraq's shrinking non-Muslim population, many of whose members have fled the country in the wake of violence directed against their communities.

"Iraq's smallest religious minorities lead a very tenuous existence, and such attacks targeting them on religious holidays underline the specific and immediate threat they face," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "The Iraqi government must do much more to protect these minorities from violence."

The Commission welcomed Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi's categorical condemnation of the attacks; he reportedly expressed his "closeness to Christians" and referred to them as "brothers." Such expressions of solidarity by government officials and among all religious communities in Iraq should help facilitate efforts to achieve reconciliation and a democratic society under the rule of law.

Chaldo-Assyrian Christians, Sabeen Mandaeans, and Yazidis make up a disproportionately large number of refugees from Iraq; nearly half of these communities' members fled abroad between 2003 and 2006, according to Iraqi government estimates. These religious minorities report that they are targeted because they do not conform with Muslim practices or are perceived as working for the U.S.-led multinational forces. Members and leaders of these communities have been targeted in violent attacks, including murder, torture, and abductions.

The U.S. government should do more to aid those members of Iraq's smallest religious minorities who have fled persecution in Iraq and who wish to seek refuge in the United States. The Commission has long recommended the establishment of a so-called "Priority 2" category for members of these groups, which would allow them to apply directly to the U.S. Refugee Program without having to go first through the process of the UN High Commissioner on Refugees. Such a designation does not necessarily nor automatically guarantee every applicant refugee status or resettlement in the United States, but it would acknowledge that Iraq's smallest religious minorities face targeted abuses, speed up the resettlement process, and allow UNHCR to focus on other vulnerable groups.

Such a designation would not automatically mean resettlement to the United States of every individual who applies, but it would speed up the resettlement process, allow UNHCR to focus on other vulnerable groups, and acknowledge that Iraq's smallest religious minorities face targeted abuses.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA) to monitor violations of the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in IRFA and set forth in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, Secretary of State, and Congress. It is the first government commission in the world with the sole mission of reviewing and making policy recommendations on the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom globally.

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Michael Cromartie